

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

Also present: Paul R. Crawford

(Recorded in Sheraton-Jefferson Hotel, St. Louis, Missouri)

Norman Kellogg Mason was born November 25, 1895 at Nassau, The Bahamas; he was the son of Ellis and Alice Mason. NM came to the United States (Miami, Florida) in 1913, because of a falling-out he had with his father; NM explains that his father intended that he play music (he began studying trumpet) in the Episcopal church, but he soon began playing other types of engagements. While in Miami, he was hired to play first trumpet with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, with which he traveled four yeards; during the latter part of his stay he was leader of the band. After the war [World War I], he quit traveling, and settled for a while in Jackson, Mississippi. Two of the members of the Rabbit Foot band were Jeff Smith, a fine trumpet player, and Amos Gilliard [spelling?], a fine trombone player; neither was a jazz musician. While in Jackson, NM organized the Young Men's Club, which promoted dances. Upon hearing that the Streckfus Company was looking for trumpet players, he applied to Captain Joe Streckfus of St. Louis, and was hired to play in the Fate Marable band aboard the excursion boat St. Paul. He joined the band in Davenport, Iowa; at his frist rehearsal, he was impressed by the different (from his own concert style) style of trumpet player Louis Armstrong, also in the Marable

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

band. Besides Armstrong and Mason on trumpet,, others in the band were: George ["Pops"] Foster, bass; Baby Dodds, drums; Johnny St. Cyr, guitar; Paul Dominguez, violin; Marable, piano. That band broke up in 1922, the third year after NM joined. [Compare The Baby Dodds Story, as told to Larry Gara, 1921, DC42, A 11; Chapt.2 and photographs, Louis Armstrong, Satchmo, Chap. 11 and photographs; discographies.] There was no clarinet in the band, although Sidney Costello, of St. Louis, had tried out on clarinet. NM decided to begin clarinet then. NM's third band featured a "modern" sound, introducing the first band with a full saxophone section to New Orleans. NM says Barney Bigard and Albert Nicholas were working on saxophones at Tom Anderson's, Rampart just off Canal. The band NM was in played a lot of society jobs. Van and Schenk [comedians] at one of the New Orleans theaters liked the band so much they wanted the band to travel with them. Mentioning "talent" he heard in New Orleans, NM lists Buddy Petit, Sam Morgan, Guy Kelly, Freddie Keppard; [A. J.] Piron's band was working at Tranchina's, at Spanish Fort. The kids in the street whistled and sang the same way the various bands played. Armstrong was NM's favorite trumpet player; there were other good ones, however, Red Allen, Sidney [Desvigne], [Amos] White, Petit, Morgan, Guy Kelly, Lee Collins and

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

3

Punch [Miller--at PRC's suggestion], to name some. The kids knew all the trumpet players, and would sing their names to the tune of "Tiger Rag." NM says he was about seventeen or eighteen when he came to New Orleans. He learned his jazz by hearing the musicians at their places of employment. He met Lorenzo Tio [Jr.], and learned that Tio's father was a fine teacher of clarinet [perhaps NM took lessons from him?]. [Sidney] Bechet left town just about the time NM arrived. [This must have been when NM was traveling with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Compare above] [Compared Sidney Bechet, Treat It Gentle.]

NM heard Joe ["King"] Oliver in Chicago. He met Bix Beiderbecke his first year of playing on the St. Paul. NM played quite a while with the band of St. Louis trumpet player Charlie Creath; the band once played an audition in Westminster Hall, where the Frankie Trumbauer band worked. In addition to Trumbauer on [C-melody] saxophone and Beiderbecke [on cornet], there were Lang, trombone, and perhaps Larry Connolly [spelling?], trombone. Trumbauer was ahead of his time; some musicians didn't like to play with him because of his "extemporaneous" style, like that of New Orleans musicians. [For "extemporaneous" quality compare matrices of his recordings. RBA]

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

4

After leaving [St. Louis?], NM went with [a band playing for] Red Skelton; NM traveled to Philadelphia, and then to New York. He eventually got to Chicago, in 1934, going to work at The Annex (23rd and State). Fletcher Henderson and his band came to work at the Grand Terrace. NM thinks Benny Goodman got his idea for his [later] small group [within his band] from Henderson; a small group from Henderson's band played after the big band got through at night; personnel: Roy Eldridge [trumpet]; Chu Berry, tenor saxophone; Scoops Carey, alto saxophone; Joe Collins, guitar; Truck Parham, bass; Buster Bailey, clarinet; Art Tatum [doubtful--PRC], piano. Goodman would come to listen at The Annex, where the Henderson small group would come to play often. NM thinks Goodman was playing at the Sherman, or another large hotel. NM remembers the first concert Goodman and a group of Henderson's men gave on a Sunday afternoon; NM thinks the regular Sunday afternoon concerts began right after that event. NM thinks Goodman pioneered, in that he took [Jimmy] Mundy along with his band to write arrangements and conduct rehearsals, so as to get a swing that the other bands had not been able to get.

NM was about ten years old when he began studying trumpet; his teacher, a Scot, kept him on scales. He himself always tried to improvise, but after he played first trumpet in bands so long, he forgot about improvising. He switched from trumpet to saxophone

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

in 1926, after having trouble with his teeth. [The photograph in The Baby Dodds Story, as told to Larry Gara, 921, D642, A11, he is shown playing saxophone with a trumpet at his feet. The year is given as 1919. Did he quit trumpet entirely in 1926 after doubling for several years?] He recorded for OKeh records [with Marable in 1924]; then illness caused him to lose his ambition to advance himself on saxophone. He did, however, play with Bernie Young, in Milwaukee, and with Red Skelton. When he discovered that he no longer could play a melody without having the music, he got some exercise books to practice, hoping to remedy that lack. He was playing then at the Central Airport, Camden [N. J.?], with the "Walkathon" show. Between shows from two to four in the evening and from eight to twelve at night, he practiced his exercises; after a few weeks, he was able to improvise, and he had never let himself forget.

In later years, when music business was slow, NM put his horn down and was writing insurance for a living. He began playing again at the suggestion of some woman that some of the musicians form a band to play music as it once was played "on the boat" [i.e., by the bands on some of the Streckfus boats]; after one cell-received concert, the woman organized a bigger one, bringing in native-son Ralph Sutton, pianist, who had been working around

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

6

New York, with Eddie Condon and others, as the featured artist. The concert was a great success, and the musicians have continued to play. NM digresses slightly, saying he taught himself saxophone and clarinet. The original band consisted of: Bill Martin, trumpet; John Orange, trombone; Janie Hemingway (now in San Francisco) piano; Elijah Shaw, drums; NM, clarinet [and one more--Singleton Palmer, sousaphone? PRC]--for a total of six. [Compare Record Changer Magazine, articles, c. 1950.] Sutton was pianist with the group for the second, larger concert. Martin, Shaw and NM now play with Singleton Palmer's Dixieland Six. The group has not recorded yet, but will soon [It has done so, several times--PRC].

NM says [Alphonse] Picou, clarinet, is an old friend, that Picou was the clarinetist in the first band NM went with to New Orleans [a Marable band?]. PRC says Picou is still active, having been on a television show [Art Ford's] about two years previous. NM, first going to New Orleans in 1920, played only with the band on the boat while there; he remembers having heard the [Original] Tuxedo Brass Band in New Orleans, but he himself played with brass bands only on the road. He remembers Manuel Perez, and Beauregard, who played with Piron's band (PRC tells NM Beauregard's correct name was Peter Bocage, who still plays an occasional job with the Eureka Brass Band). [This is probably an error on NM's part.]

NORMAN MASON
I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

Willie Humphrey [the younger] played clarinet and tenor saxophone with the last band NM worked with on a boat. (PRC tells NM that Percy Humphrey, trumpet [and leader of the Eureka Brass Band] and Willie recently played for the New Orleans Jazz Club; Jim Robinson, trombone; Cie Frazier, drums; Richard McLean, bass; George Guesnon, banjo; Emma Barrett [who played years ago with (Papa) Celestin], piano.

NM recorded, on alto saxophone, with Fate Marable's band; they did two tunes, for OKeh--"Frankie and Johnny" and a fast, saxophone number, "Piano flage." Others in the band at the time: Harvey [Langford? Lightfoot] trombone; Burroughs Lovingood and Marable, pianos; Amos White and Sidney Desvigne, trumpets; Walter Thomas, third alto sax; Bert Bailey, tenor sax; NM, [first] alto sax. Thomas was not the same as Walter "Foots" Thomas; the Marable Thomas later joined Cab Calloway's band and died shortly afterward. Two others also on the record were George Foster's brother [Willie Foster, banjo and Henry Kimball (the elder)], bass. The records were made in about 1927. [Compare discographies. 1924]. NM says the band would have probably made more recordings, but recordings were not emphasized in those years as they are now.

I [only]--Digest--Retyped
February 6, 1960

Jelly Roll [Morton] came to the Marable band in 1926, to make a tour in Ohio. The band was Marable's with Morton leading; Marable played [second] piano on the tour. The numbers that band recorded, for Okeh and under Morton's name, were "The Pearls", "Grandpa's Spells", "Milenburg Joys" and "If You Could Be With Me" [i.e., "If I Could Be With You"]. [Compare Brian Rust, Jazz Records, 1897 to 1931, p. 423] NM says he thinks Radio Corporation of America was booking the band on the tour [perhaps MCA?]. NM roomed with Morton, and knew a lot of his tunes. NM mentions the Morton Library of Congress recordings. NM made some records, including "The Pearls", with Morton's small traveling band; besides NM, some others in that band were: Leon Washington, tenor saxophone; Joe Collins, guitar; Truck Parham, bass. NM says he didn't realize at the time that Morton was as famous [or going to become as famous] as he was and later became. The tour lasted about one month, traveling throughout Ohio, with some dates in West Virginia and Indiana.

NM says the captain [on the Streckfus boat] bought Louis Armstrong a song whistle [i.e., slide whistle], on which he played "Whispering" and "Love Nest." Then a slide trumpet was bought for him, on which he played "Wang Wang Blues." Speaking of scat singing--the captain insisted that someone sing the tune, "Don't Take Away Those Blues;" Armstrong volunteered, forgot the words, and

began to improvise --hence, the birth of scat. Boyd Atkins, playing violin in the band on the boat then, later wrote "Heebie Jeebies", the tune Armstrong first recorded with a scat chorus. This piece "started him on his way." It was an instantenous hit.

NM says there was a newspaper, or a column in a newspaper, called "Heebie Jeebies." NM says there was a tough trumpet coda written for the tune, and that when Armstrong, on the recording, came to that part, he sang a scat chorus instead. [Compare (album notes?)]. NM speaks of the critics of Armstrong and his band just before Armstrong's first European tour; the critics said Armstrong took too much of the spotlight; NM says Armstrong's use of his band as almost strictly accompanying group has proved to be the right course for Armstrong. A trumpet player-arranger from St. Louis, Z[ilmer] T. Randolph, was in that band. NM recalls that Armstrong used to play a couple of numbers on [the Vendome Theatre] stage with the Erskine Tate orchestra in Chicago, then go to his own job with his own band, which included Earl Hines in the personnel. NM says Armstrong was the most congenial person he ever met, and that he still is.

NM played in several towns in Alabama, when with a road show, but never in Mobile, although he passed through there on a train once. He also played in several towns in Mississippi and Louisiana with road shows. When he was in Nassau, he would hear sailors singing the song, "I Saw The Prettiest Girl I Ever Saw Down in Mobile." NM married a girl from Mobile. The music NM remembers

NORMAN MASON
I [only]-Digest-Retyped
February 6, 1960

10

from his childhood included that which became known as "calypso."

NM did not know Richard M. Jones. He knew Walter "Fats" Pichon, and also Steve Lewis, then of the Piron band. Lewis was playing a style of piano popular then; NM says the New Orleans pianists played their "Ragtime" [i.e., jazz?] style, not playing tunes like "Swinging Down the Lane" and "Love Nest", as did the band on the boat; the style of the boat band was different from the New Orleans style. Pichon, who worked for quite a while in St. Louis, played a sort of Fats Waller style (hence the nickname). [RBA?] NM says the style of music on the boat changed when saxophones were introduced to the band; from playing rags, the band began playing tunes like "Whispering" [i.e., popular bands, thirty-two bar tunes. The arranging style. NM says he thinks that one of the biggest changes in music was brought about when Don Redman left McKinney's Cotton Pickers to form his own band; he says Redman was the first to use five saxes and six brass (three trumpets [and three trombones]), and the first to use the "double augmented" chord [i.e., augmented chord], which he introduced in his "Chant of the Weed". NM discusses subsequent developments, including bop. NM discusses the symphony, and its lack of appeal to the mass of people. NM says when he was growing up, the greatest cornet player in America was Herbert Clarke, the greatest trombone player Arthur Pryor; they both played simple tunes for their solos, so that people could understand and feel what they were playing.

End of Reel I and interview.